

## *Bo Knows Freedom*

Drash on Parashah 15; Bo  
By MMin Kevin Phipps (aka Oriyan)

It seems that regardless of what doctrinal bent you have, there will always be particular Scriptures that don't seem to fit nicely into what you believe. There may even be some Scriptures that seem to disprove what you believe, though in some cases you may never understand or see it. If you do, your theological bent will likely bend in a different direction, which is not always a bad thing. The "sticky" passages become like when I was a kid and I wondered how Santa ever brought us gifts at Christmas when we lived in an apartment that had no chimney. Supposedly a guy that lives on whole milk and cookies fit through our keyhole. At times pastors have to get just as creative to explain away the "whaddabout" passages.

If you go to a typical Christian church, there are certain scripture portions, like the majority of the Old Testament for example, which tend to be avoided; especially books like Leviticus and Numbers. In Messianic synagogues, the teaching tends to be reversed. Leviticus takes on a new name, Vayikra, and all of a sudden it's cool; but then, New Testament books like Romans and Galatians get the black list. Paul goes from Christian hero to Messianic nemesis. His apparent replacement of the Mosaic Law for Yeshua's grace leaves many unprepared Messianics scrambling before Christian Goliaths of theology, to explain how our faith is not some creative myth in the same ranks of a fat guy fitting through a keyhole.

This is exactly why my teaching this week comes from Galatians 5. Try not to suck all the air out of the room, now. Understanding Paul is not as difficult and doesn't require as much creativity as you might think. It just takes a brief study into the historical background of Paul's writings and an honest look at what Paul is teaching in light of the rest of Scripture.

There are actually rules to reading the Bible. When we read the Bible, we have to realize it is written in different literary genres. There is narrative, dialogue, poetry, history, prophecy, letters, and I'm sure others that I'm not thinking of. We can't read poetry in the same way as we read history. Everything has to be taken in context. We could use the Bible, as many have, to justify all kinds of heresies by taking verses out of context. Context is not just the textual environment, though this is part of it. The Word of God was written within a historical context; taking a passage out of that context can also lead to error.

So, as we read the letters of Paul, we have to realize that these are letters. They are correspondence between Paul and a particular church or leader, in a particular region, with particular strengths and weaknesses, which Paul addresses in his writings. When we are modern American, English speaking, Christian minded people, reading the writings of a Jewish Roman first century believer, there are bound to be misunderstandings. Especially if we don't take the little extra time to understand the context and read the letters in the sandals of the man who wrote them, as closely as we possibly can. If we just take Paul's writings at face value, we can come away thinking that marriage is wrong for the believer who truly wants to serve God. Clearly, this is not something that coincides with the rest of Scripture.

As we read Galatians, as well as the other letters written to local churches, we first have to do what we can to understand those places. Galatia was a region in what was then Anatolia, also referred to as Asia Minor. Eventually this area was conquered by pilgrims, and today we call it Turkey (just kidding about the pilgrims). What is interesting to note about Galatia is that these people were Gallic. In fact, they spoke a Celtic language until the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. In today's world, these people might have been French, which explains why they were so easily defeated by the Romans shortly before the time of Messiah. Knowing their Celtic nature will give you an idea of the religious nature of the people of Galatia. Various kinds of animism and polytheism were common. Today we would call them wiccans. Some were druids. Witchcraft and homosexuality were common. Of course, the Greco-Roman religious influences were there, too, as Galatia was a Roman province at the time. These people were very fickle in their beliefs. In Acts, we see them worshipping Paul one moment and stoning him almost to death the next. They focused on external ritual in their religious practices, as most pagan religion does. Their Celtic origins probably made them even more susceptible to this than others where the apostles started churches. They had actually begun to follow the feasts and many other Jewish customs (though not circumcision); but it was more because it was the thing to do, not out of obedience to God as their King. The real problem came when these sheep encountered the wolves of the Judaizers.

The Judaizers were Jewish Believers who believed you had to be Jewish to be a believer. They went around preaching Torah and circumcision and other Jewish customs to Gentiles as a prerequisite to believing in Yeshua and therefore being saved. The important thing to notice is that they were not just teaching Torah to Gentiles, but making it a requirement for salvation. This is not what Messianic Jews teach today. This is not what the Bible teaches. Avraham was a father of nations (plural). The Temple was

a house of prayer for all nations (plural). The New Jerusalem in Revelation is the center of worship for all nations (plural). It is not, and never has been, a requirement for Gentiles to become Jewish to believe in Messiah Yeshua.

There are a few other noteworthy facts here. One is that according to the Talmud, there were three requirements in Yeshua's day for a Gentile who wanted to become Jewish. The first was circumcision, the second was mikveh (baptism) and the third was a sacrifice offering at the Temple (which is not effective in the absence of a Temple). Ironically, Torah observance was not a necessity to be Jewish. In fact, it is not necessary for a person to formally convert to Judaism in order to adopt any or all beliefs and practices of Judaism. In Judaism, such people are referred to as righteous Gentiles. So any idea that following Torah is purely a Jewish concept and if you follow Torah, you are therefore Jewish, trying to be Jewish, or have to be Jewish to do it, is false. The fact that the Judaizers were making Torah observance and circumcision a necessity to become Jewish, and only after becoming Jewish could a person have saving faith in Yeshua, is why their teaching was a heresy and why Paul had to deal with their teachings so strongly in the early church.

*We know that the Torah is good, provided one uses it in the way the Torah itself intends.  
[1Timothy 1:8]*

This is Paul speaking here. These are not the words of a man who is against Torah and does not think Torah is for believers. Another rule of Bible study is that scripture does not contradict itself, as it is the singular Word of God. If Paul is good with Torah here, he cannot be against Torah elsewhere. He may be against a certain expression of Torah observance that goes beyond its intended purpose, but he is not against Torah observance altogether. Knowing what we know now about Galatia and the Judaizers, let's wade through Galatians 5.

*What the Messiah has freed us for is freedom! Therefore, stand firm, and don't let yourselves be tied up again to a yoke of slavery. [Galatians 5:1]*

The slavery Paul is talking about – is it Torah? No. There is a difference between slavery, autonomy and freedom. Here is where we go back to the parashah reading in Exodus. The people of Israel were slaves in Egypt. Pharaoh had complete control over their lives. When God freed them from Egypt, He didn't tell them to go and live wherever and however they wanted. This would have been autonomy. He led them as a nation to the wilderness, where He gave them His Law to teach them how to live as His people, so He could be their God and lead them to the Promised Land. Freedom does not come from autonomy, but in learning to live within established boundaries that protect from enemies and connect a person to the infinite nature of God. Torah does not

bring slavery, but freedom. It is the laws of man that lead to slavery. Torah has an intended purpose, and outside that purpose, it leads to legalism, pride, hypocrisy, and slavery.

Personal autonomy is a self-defeating philosophy, because you cannot have more than one person living in the same place without one person's autonomy interfering with someone else's; so, rules have to be established to keep such interference from happening. After awhile, autonomy leads to its own form of bondage; and the irony is, by then everyone is duped into thinking they are still free.

*Mark my words – I, Sha'ul, tell you that if you undergo b'rit-milah the Messiah will be of no advantage to you at all! Again, I warn you: any man who undergoes b'rit-milah is obligated to observe the entire Torah! You who are trying to be declared righteous by God through legalism have severed yourselves from the Messiah! You have fallen away from God's grace! For it is by the power of the Spirit, who works in us because we trust and are faithful, that we confidently expect our hope of attaining righteousness to be fulfilled. When we are united with the Messiah Yeshua, neither being circumcised nor being uncircumcised matters; what matters is trusting faithfulness expressing itself through love. [Galatians 5:2-6]*

It can be easy to think that Paul is against circumcision, but this is not the case. In the historical context, we understand now that the Judaizers were using circumcision to convert Gentiles to Judaism as a prerequisite to belief in Messiah. We understand, as Paul did, that this is not Biblically accurate. Circumcision was a sign of the Abrahamic Covenant. Outside of this intended purpose, it becomes a bad thing. As with everything, circumcision has boundaries. Within the boundaries, it is good. Outside those boundaries, it is legalism and empty ritual, and can even be called mutilation of the body, God's tabernacle. The Judaizers were leading the Galatians to confusion and disunity, threatening to undo the work that Paul and others had worked so hard to accomplish.

*For, brothers, you were called to be free. Only do not let that freedom become an excuse for allowing your old nature to have its way. Instead, serve one another in love. For the whole of the Torah is summed up in this one sentence: "Love your neighbor as yourself"; but if you go on snapping at each other and tearing each other to pieces, watch out, or you will be destroyed by each other! What I am saying is this: run your lives by the Spirit. Then you will not do what your old nature wants. For the old nature wants what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit wants what is contrary to the old nature. These oppose each other, so that you find yourselves unable to carry out your good intentions. But if you are led by the Spirit, then you are not in subjection to the system that results from perverting the Torah into legalism. And it is perfectly evident what the old nature does. It expresses itself in sexual immorality, impurity and indecency; involvement with the occult and with drugs; in feuding, fighting, becoming jealous and getting angry; in selfish ambition, factionalism, intrigue and envy; in drunkenness, orgies and things like these. I warn you now as I have warned you before: those who do such things will have no share in the Kingdom of God! [Galatians 13-21]*

It was easier for God to take Israel out of Egypt than it was for God to take Egypt out of Israel. They were free from their bondage but easily slipped back to the ways they were used to in Egypt. God wanted them to be free, but freedom came from following Him and His ways, not the false religions and practices of Egypt. In Messiah, we are free, but what are we free from? Sin? No, because we still do it, even if we don't want to. Paul himself wrestled with this. Freedom in Yeshua is freedom from the condemnation that comes from sin, not from sin itself. Just because we are free does not mean we do not have the responsibility to learn to follow Him.

If the fact that we are saved by faith and not by works means that works are not important, then why would we even be commanded to love God and our fellow man? If we somehow make an exception for these two commands, we assume ourselves to have more wisdom than we actually have – sheep that we are – if we think we know how to do it without Torah teaching us how. We see in this passage that failure to love according to the laws of Torah leads to all kinds of sinful behavior which is never to characterize the man or woman of God. Would it make any sense for a person to live in sexual immorality or anger or drunkenness and claim to be a Believer saved by grace? Other passages, some written by Paul himself, would give an emphatic “no!” In fact such a person is deceived, does not live in the light as He is in the light, and brings disgrace to the body of Messiah and His work of redemption on the cross. The same cannot be said of the person who lives by the laws of Torah, in their proper context, as Yeshua did.

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, self control. Nothing in the Torah stands against such things. Moreover, those who belong to the Messiah Yeshua have put their old nature to death on the stake, along with its passions and desires. Since it is through the Spirit that we have Life, let it also be through the Spirit that we order our lives day by day. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. [Galatians 5:22-26]*

If we truly have the blood of Messiah pumping through our veins, the fruit of the Spirit will be the goals we strive for every moment of every day. If the Torah does not stand against these goals, then, stated in the positive, Torah supports them. And, in its proper context and purpose Torah will assist us, along with God's grace, to grow these fruits in our life.

Just because our lives are led by the Spirit, that does not mean we do not also follow Torah. It is the Torah of Truth that the Spirit enables us to do. The Holy Spirit of God simply fulfills the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31:30 that states that the Torah

would be written on our hearts. The Spirit cannot be separated from Torah any more than the Living Word cannot be separated from the written.

Paul was a Jewish Believer who was called by God to teach Gentiles, most of whom were coming out of all sorts of pagan religions, how to have a relationship with God. Once a Gentile put his or her faith in Messiah and was filled with the Holy Spirit, then as a believer, they could learn the ways of the Kingdom and adopt whatever customs of Israel they chose, as long as they remained in their intended purpose, did not wander into legalism, and did not become a stumbling block for other believers. Paul was not against Torah, but taught, as Messiah did, how to follow Torah in its purpose and context intended by God.

Our faith in Messiah frees us from the bondage of our sins, while freeing us to learn the ways of the Kingdom without fear of failure. As we learn to follow the Messiah of Israel, we not only learn Torah, but the traditions and customs that have characterized God's people for thousands of years. Our freedom enables us, who are Gentiles by birth, to adopt whatever traditions and practices add to our faith and enhance our relationship with God. What we have to discern is the difference between command and custom. Observing Shabbat is commanded, while the various blessings that are a part of opening and closing Shabbat are not. We are free to start our own family traditions that teach us the values and truths of the Kingdom, to help future generations build and celebrate their faith as we do. What we always have to keep in mind is that, just as our freedom enables us adopt whatever traditions benefit our relationship with God, the freedom of others will cause them to adopt traditions that may be different. As we learn to observe the commands of God's Word, we have to be aware of the context and purpose of such laws, so as to remain within the scope of their intended purpose and not to slip into legalism, pride, judgmentalism, and false teaching as the Judaizers of Paul's day did. All we do, we are to do it to the glory of God, and never forget that we can do nothing without grace of God and His Spirit enabling us to do it.